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THE ETHICAL FUNCTION OF THE HISTORIAN¹

THE question, "What is History?" is closely connected with that deepest of all questions, "What is Human Life?". For, whatever in reality human life may be, history is the record of its development, its progress and its manifestations.

I have said "the record" rather than the historic process itself, because that is the phase of the subject with which the historian has primarily to deal. What this process really is, what is its inherent principle of change, what are the categories of its manifestations—these are questions for the philosopher rather than the historian to discuss.

But, in truth, the historian cannot separate himself from some conception—general or specific, positive or negative, real or ideal—of the process whose transmutations he describes. Even if he were able to do so, language has already settled that question for him; for he cannot tell the simplest story without some implications regarding the nature of the process which forms the substance of his narrative.

Frankly, then, the fundamental problem for the historian is to determine the peculiar nature of his task; and he is greeted at the very threshold of his inquiry with the questions: What is the purpose for which historical science exists? What is the nature of historic truth? How does history differ from other sciences? How does the historic process appear as seen from within? And what in consequence is the chief function of the historian?

Without attempting to give a definite answer to all or any of these difficult questions, of which the majority of my colleagues in this congress, from deeper knowledge and riper experience, are much better qualified than I to express opinions, and with an acute sense of my limited attainments in this vast field of inquiry in which many of my countrymen have rendered themselves far more entitled to be heard, I shall, nevertheless, venture to touch upon some of these topics in such a manner as to emphasize one function of the historian that seems to me from the nature of history as a science to be worthy of our attention.

¹ An address delivered at the opening of the International Congress for Historical Sciences, at Berlin, on August 6, 1908.

I.

If, as will perhaps be generally admitted, the purpose of history is to reinstate the past and render it intelligible by a rigorous separation of fact from fiction, it is only by a gradual process that mankind has arrived at that conception. As in the contemplation of nature, so in the first estimate of human deeds, wonder rather than exact comprehension was undoubtedly the chief source of inspiration. The unusual, the extraordinary in every sense, most attracted attention, impressed memory and stimulated phantasy. The earliest traditions were, therefore, of great heroes and great occasions, while the phenomena of ordinary life, like the habitual course of nature, passed without observation and left no trace behind. Depending entirely upon the accidents of memory, modified from generation to generation by unconscious imaginative accretions, the saga and the legend for long ages satisfied the needs of primitive men in relation to the past.

With the invention of the art of writing, inscriptions, annals and chronicles gradually superseded the more fluid medium of oral tradition, and gave to the record of human events a more fixed and definite character. But the same tendencies of mind that stimulated imagination in the saga and the legend continued to act, and imparted even to written documents the quality of unconscious falsification.

Until this tendency was restrained by a counteracting influence sufficiently potent to repress it, history as a science was of course impossible; and it is interesting to note that, although in previous ages men were often ready to die for what seemed to them the truth, the faculty and conception of reverence for truth *as such*, and *for itself*, apart from its personal, party, or national consequences, are, even in the modern world, comparatively recent acquisitions. As Lord Acton, speaking of the scientific sense of truth, has tersely said, "The notion and analysis of conscience are scarcely older than the year 1700; and the notion and analysis of veracity are scarcely older than our time, barring certain sacred writings of East and West."

It is a noteworthy fact that about the time assigned by Lord Acton to the rise of the notion and analysis of conscience—namely the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth century—the natural sciences were already showing signs of a new life, and historical science was just beginning. It was in 1681 that the great work of Mabillon, *De Re Diplomatica*, which created the science of determining the age and authenticity of documents,

first appeared, the supplement being published in 1704. About the same time, in 1690, appeared the *Histoire des Empereurs* of Le Nain de Tillemont, who, according to Monod, was "the first to teach how historical truth is arrived at by rigorous analysis and comparison of texts". It was in the year 1700 that Muratori began at Modena to gather and edit the documents which form his great compilation of authentic texts. In 1708, Montfaucon laid the foundations of Greek epigraphy by the publication of his *Palaeographia Graeca*, soon afterward followed by the great collections of texts for French history. In Germany, Leibnitz, in 1700, founded the Royal Prussian Academy of Sciences at Berlin, and began, in 1707, his *Scriptores Rerum Brunsvicensium*, the originality of which, according to Wegele, consisted in "relying upon authentic testimony and rejecting baseless traditions".

Men had, no doubt, long valued truth, as they understood it; but there is a fundamental difference between the unreflective conscience which instinctively feels the baseness of intentional falsehood, and the scientific conscience which values truth *in and for itself*, and aims to establish it in a scientific manner. It is the valuation of truth simply because it is truth that underlies and vitalizes all our modern science and has compelled us to reconstruct our entire conception of the universe and of our human past.

II.

What, then, is the part of the historian in the enterprise of establishing the truth? To answer that question we must first inquire, What is the essential character of the materials with which the historian has to deal? Every adept in historiography knows how dim and vague were the notions of the early chroniclers, apart from all conscious deception, regarding the precise lines of division between the *actual*, the *probable* and the *possible*; and how easily, without intention, they glide from one to another of these categories in their efforts to construct *une belle histoire!* All contemporary historians are of course agreed that these categories should not be confused; but the task of truth-telling is embarrassed not only by the temptation to fill a lacuna in the records with a well-meaning act of imagination based on probability or possibility, but also by the unconscious pressure of the historian's personal system of ideas derived from the *Weltanschauung* of the time in which he lives or of the school of thought in which he has been trained.

The development of historiography reveals the manner in which

the ruling philosophy or the *Zeitgeist* of each age has permeated and colored the conception of the historic process. "Der Sinn für die Wirklichkeit" is no doubt always present in the mind of the historian; and it is not doubtful that, as Wilhelm von Humboldt described it, "Die Aufgabe des Geschichtsschreibens ist die Darstellung des Geschehenen"; but the idealist and the materialist, the mystic and the rationalist, will always, and almost inevitably, though quite unconsciously, permit his own peculiar apprehension of the ultimate nature of reality to affect the choice and interpretation of the data he employs and the whole character of the edifice he constructs.

There is, however, so much the greater necessity for exactly comprehending the essential nature of historic truth and distinguishing it as far as possible from the great body of conceptions which constitute the philosophical *Weltanschauung* of the age in which we live; for, while the various sciences often throw light upon one another, and our cosmic conception, as a whole, may receive valuable contributions from them all, each of them may likewise suffer injury by an unwarranted importation into them of principles borrowed from other sciences which possess a different character.

It is, therefore, worth while to bear in mind that there are two aspects of reality which have to be treated in quite different ways. It is a postulate of modern science that there exists in the universe a fixed amount of energy, never increased or diminished, and all phenomena are believed to be manifestations of this primordial energy. Some of these phenomena appear in an order of coexistence in space, others in an order of succession in time; and it is with these transformations in time that history has to deal. But there is another aspect of phenomena not less important for history than transformation in time. The resemblances and differences of phenomena are both quantitative and qualitative. It is with the latter chiefly that history has to deal; for, while the quantity of coexistent energy always remains the same, the qualitative differences among phenomena appear to be always increasing in variety and complexity in the order of succession.

If, for illustration, we pass from physico-chemical to biological phenomena, and from these to psychological phenomena, in the progressive order of natural evolution, we notice that, while the quantity of energy is supposed to remain the same, there is an ever-increasing variation of qualitative differences, until in the ascending scale of organisms we arrive at man, who, standing at the head of the biological series, possesses a greater diversity and com-

plexity of qualitative distinctions than any other being known to science.

It is worthy of attention also that, in measuring and comparing phenomena, there are two different methods of procedure which correspond to the difference of quantity and quality. In the case of quantity, whether of a number of units or of magnitudes, the instrument of comparison is mathematics. Given a numerical or geometrical standard, all quantities of the same kind, or related to the same standard, can be mathematically compared. It is worthy of observation that the mathematical method finds its largest and surest application where the differences of quality are the fewest, and it becomes less and less fruitful as these differences increase in number. Thus, for example, the simple motions of the heavenly bodies are uniformly subject to exact mathematical calculation and predetermination, while the precise movements of an animal are less, and the complex conduct of a man least of all, capable of mathematical measurement and prediction.

As we rise in the scale of qualitative development from the chemical compound to the plant, from the plant to the animal, and from the animal governed by instinct to man governed by reason, we find mathematics less and less sufficient as an organ of investigation. While in the realms of color, temperature and other secondary physical properties quantity may furnish a key to the explanation of quality, we find ourselves at last in a sphere of being where quality is the matter of supreme interest, and where the mathematical method ceases to apply. The social life of man, the progress of civilization, the formation and development of political institutions, the rise and fall of empires, the relations between independent states—all these transformations belong to the sphere of qualitative change, defy mathematical calculation and demand a new instrument of comparison and comprehension.

III.

It is precisely this new and higher sphere of human activity which is, by common consent, *par excellence* the field of history. The study of the successful transformations of quality may, however, go far back of this; and it is the appreciation of qualitative changes in the pre-human world that has illuminated the realms of astronomy and biology with the great principle of natural evolution. The point I wish here to establish is, however, the scientific necessity of qualitative as distinguished from quantitative measurement in estimating the phenomena of human life, which are the phenomena

of human history. One side of human science is built up with answers to the question, "*How much?*". There is another side, equally important to science in its totality, and far more rich in human interest, which depends upon the answers to the question, "*Of what kind?*" and this is the historical as distinguished from the mathematical aspect of science.

As mathematics answers the questions of the first series, so history answers those of the second. It deals with transformations of a qualitative character, while mathematics deals with quantitative relations. To make clear the difference, let us note the contrast between the mathematical and the historical methods. The former aim to discover the uniformities that exist in space and time; that is, to reach the largest attainable generalizations of the laws of invariable action. The aim of history is exactly the opposite. It does not seek for the law of recurrence, or any element of uniformity in either space or time; but to ascertain what particular changes have taken place in a definite time, with a view of estimating their relations as a series of acts, or of appreciating their value and significance as manifestations of the qualitative aspect of the universe. While mathematical science measures phenomena with reference to their quantity in terms of space or time, historical science measures them according to their value as elements of success or failure in the accomplishment of certain results as expressed in terms of human sensibility and rational worth; that is, according as they are beneficial or injurious, prudent or imprudent, ennobling or degrading, civilizing or barbarizing, commendable or reprehensible. In brief, while the sciences based on mathematics aim at the most universal generalizations of what happens in space and time in order to discover general laws, the historical sciences aim at a knowledge of the serial development of phenomena in a definite time and a definite place, showing the order in which they occurred, the conditions out of which they arose, the influence exercised by them and the consequent value of these phenomena, not in terms of number and magnitude, but as manifestations of reality ranked as inferior or superior in the scale of human utility or appreciation.

How fruitful the historical method may be, joined with the mathematical, in the study of nature is proved by the results that have followed from its application. Our whole conception of the universe has been changed by it under the influence of Laplace, Lamarck, Darwin and their successors. Instead of a rigid, static order of things, we now conceive of the universe as undergoing constant transformation; and it is in these processes of change that its

real nature is revealed. Even the elements of matter are now understood to have had their history, and it is in the course of their evolution from stardust to living organisms that their inherent potencies, which escape mathematical analysis, are brought to light.

IV.

There is one characteristic of human history, however, which separates it entirely from the history of nature, namely, the fact that a portion of it—or at least a specimen of its process—occurs in the individual consciousness, and can be examined from the point of view of man as a voluntary being, acting for definite purposes. I do not wish at this time to enter into the lively controversy carried on in recent years regarding the nature of historic causation, which is essentially a question of philosophy upon which opinions are still divided; and I here express no preference for one or another of the opposing theories that find the chief factor of historic change to be physical or psychical, individual or social, intellectual or moral. What I wish to insist upon is that, whether man be a really creative agent or merely a conscious mechanism put in motion by heredity and environment, whether he be impelled to action by blind and irresistible impulses or guided by intellectual enlightenment, the substance with which the history of man is concerned is *personal conduct*, and the *reaction of conduct upon human development*.

I do not doubt that the historical process may be governed by general laws, and it may be that all qualitative differences in human experience may be—or might be if our knowledge were sufficiently extended—reduced to purely quantitative elements, and the whole course of development explained upon a mathematical basis. What, on the other hand, seems to me most evident is, that history has no contribution to make to this enterprise, which, if it is ever to be rendered successful, must be accomplished by some other branch of science. Since history is the record of particular occurrences, no one of which has the property of universal necessity, and since—unlike the phenomena of nature—the phenomena of human history can never be exactly repeated, they contain no data that warrant absolute generalizations; and, therefore, disclose no necessary laws of action. As Treitschke has well said: “Wäre die Geschichte eine exakte Wissenschaft, so müssten wir im Stande sein, die Zukunft der Staaten zu enthüllen. Das können wir aber nicht, denn überall stößt die Geschichtswissenschaft auf das Rätsel der Persönlichkeit. Personen, Männer, sind es, welche die Geschichte machen.”

If there is any proposition upon which all schools of thought are agreed, it is that persons are the agents of historical movements. Each person, even the greatest, may be but a molecule in the moving mass of humanity; and social directions and velocities may be determined by physical conditions, but they operate always and everywhere through beings who are more or less dimly conscious of whither and why they are moving. Nothing could be a better proof of this than the fact that in every great historical movement there is a conscious effort to rescue something, so to speak, from time, and to give it permanent endurance. Every monument, every inscription, every chronicle designed to commemorate a part played by a man or a nation in its impress upon a period bears witness to this human impulse. All the records of the past are the fruits of it. There seems to be in the current of the historic process something that rises above it and is not part of it, which judges, measures and estimates that which is fugitive and that which is permanent in it. There is in every generation of men a disposition to see in events some increase of good or some access of evil, some lesson for the enrichment of experience or some caution for the future. It is this effort to profit by the changes men are able to effect and to render permanent their achievements that has led to the making and preservation of historical documents, and it is this that inspires the historian to endure the labor and sacrifice of research.

Seen from within, the historic process opens new vistas to the historian. What is the signification of this ceaseless struggle with the evanescent and this endeavor to lift the contents of time to a position of permanent security? Does it not imply in the human agent a sense of continuity through which he realizes his part in the general development of man, and his duty as a member of the human race? It is in the great crises of history that its true nature is made apparent. Only those who have lived through them and have had some part in them possess in its full sense the meaning of the historic process; for it is only as a part of it that the individual, in moments of victory or defeat, in the march of triumph or fainting on the field of battle, knows that the social unit counts for most when he is part of some great movement in which humanity moves on from one to another stadium in the realization of its destiny.

V.

If history is ever to throw any light upon the riddle of personality, beyond that which biology and psychology afford, it can be done in no other way than by bravely pursuing its own method

of recording the acts of men as they have actually occurred, and not by elaborating theories of causation. The temptation is strong to regard history as belonging in the same class with the inductive and nomological sciences, and to apply to it methods which pertain to them. Only thus, it has sometimes been represented, can history be shown to possess a scientific character. But this inference results from a failure to recognize the fact that, as we have shown, the sciences of quantity and the sciences of quality, though fundamentally different in conception and procedure, are co-ordinate in dignity and importance for mankind.

There is, it is true, no science where there are neither measurements nor relations upon which measurements can be based. For this reason it may be contended that no form of human knowledge is really scientific, unless it is based upon mathematics and can be expressed in exact and universal formulas. While it is undeniable that science of necessity requires measurement and comparison, it is an error to suppose that mathematical measurement and comparison are the only forms of human estimate or that scientific knowledge may not be based as firmly upon differences as upon resemblances and uniformities. While the observer of physical phenomena measures them upon a scale expressed in quantitative units, the observer of historical phenomena measures them upon a scale expressed in qualitative differences. The essential basis of science is variation of experience, which may be capable of expression in either of two ways: the mathematical, which measures it in terms of quantitative value; or the ethical, which measures it in terms of qualitative value.

I have used the term "ethical" in contrast to "mathematical", because I understand by "ethics" the science of value in human conduct, and employ the adjective derived from it for want of a better term. Whatever criticism may be passed upon the expression, the distinction it is intended to represent is indisputable. There exist beyond question these two forms of value: that which is measurable in terms of duration and magnitude, and that which is measurable in terms of sensibility and utility. If, indeed, we undertake for a moment to compare them, we at once remark that quantitative or mathematical standards are in reality mere abstract units derived from the analysis of space and time; while qualitative or ethical standards, in the broad meaning here intended, represent those distinctions which affect our sensibilities or human purposes, and are, therefore, the measures of the most essential elements of our human experience.

If I am correct in this analysis, it is no derogation of the rank and position of history in the hierarchy of knowledge to say that it is an ethical rather than a mathematical science. And if this is so, then it is evident that the function of the historian in dealing with historical material is an ethical function; not simply because it is his duty, in common with all other men of science, to discover and to state the truth with a high sense of his responsibility to mankind, but because the whole substance of history is of an ethical nature. It is the work of the historian to trace the upward or downward curve of man's development as displayed in the various forms of human conduct, such as art, industry, thought, literature and politics; and, if possible, to bring to light by following the successive transformations that have affected that development the forces and conditions that have in fact produced it, and the effect of particular instances of conduct upon it.

In using the expression "ethical function", I do not mean that the historian is to set himself up as a moral judge, and to pass mere private judgments upon historical events. What I mean to affirm is, that the purpose and use of history are found in the truthful record and just estimate of human conduct, which is the outward expression of the real nature of man as a being capable of varying degrees of success or failure in realizing the ends of rational activity. It is with this success or failure that history has to deal, and it is these that the historian is especially called upon to appreciate. To illustrate my meaning, the interest of history does not lie in the fact that so many painters and sculptors lived in a certain period of time and produced so many works, but in the quality of the pictures and statues they created; not in the fact that so many soldiers fought in so many battles and succeeded in killing so many of their number, but in the social purpose for which they fought and the effect of their victory upon human happiness; not in the fact that so many rulers bearing such and such names reigned during so many dynasties, but in the arts they promoted, the legislation that was enacted and the growth of civilization under their rule.

The necessity of this ethical function on the part of the historian grows directly out of the nature of the historic process. Although the life of mankind in its totality may be, and in some sense is, dependent upon the natural energies that underlie human existence, there is in every individual a sense of relation to the past and to the future; that is, a historic consciousness, that distinguishes man from his fellow-creatures of the organic world. And this historic con-

sciousness not only includes a certain sense of indebtedness for the labors and solicitude of the past, but there is, perhaps, no human individual, certainly no typical individual, who does not feel that the forces acting in and through him, whatsoever they are, have ends that ought to be accomplished. And this sense of what ought to be, as distinguished from what is, whether heeded or neglected in practice, is universally recognized as furnishing a standard for the judgment of conduct as good or bad, useful or useless, wise or unwise, noble or ignoble. Further than this, the character of a social community, or of a phase or a period in its development, is determined, and takes its place in the scale of civilization, in accordance with the degree of success or failure in conforming to the norms or standards of conduct as existing in the consciousness of the time.

There is, therefore, in the nature of man a scale of values by which progress or decadence in art, industry, economy, politics, literature and philosophy may be estimated. Alongside the problems of explanation, for the solution of which we appeal to the abstract sciences, are problems of attainment, for whose solution we appeal to history. In the complex of active forces by which we are surrounded there is also a hierarchy of motives by which men are actuated. Whether these motives are absolute or relative, whether the ends at which we aim are attainable or unattainable, does not in any way alter the fact that we are conscious agents in the historic process, as well as observers of its development. Not to feel its inspiration is utterly to miss its meaning, for the true essence of history lies far more in the will to attain than in the power to explain.

For this reason, namely, that the chief factor of the historic process is the will rather than the intellect, the prediction of the future is impossible. Every great historic movement is a struggle in which contending forces are opposed. Every individual in the social mass in every age is aiming at the realization of his desires. What the net result will be in any particular time and place is difficult to estimate. The mathematical method upon which the physical sciences are based fails us utterly; for in this calculation all the units are different, and all are liable to sudden changes of value. When therefore we apply a systematic, or a strictly genetic, method to a period of history, we are employing a false assumption; for arts, nations and institutions do not grow like plants, they develop by a series of explosions.

The one constant factor in the historic process is human nature,

which is sometimes governed by reason, but generally moved by impulse. The business of the historian therefore is not to make history seem reasonable by placing upon it a scientific stamp foreign to its nature; but to display the motives that have determined the historic process as it has in reality been unfolded. If he is thus faithful in his exposition of motive and result, his work will have a far greater scientific value than if he imports into it principles and methods borrowed from other sciences dealing with materials of a different nature, or products of purely intellectual abstraction; for the effect of this importation is to impart to history an appearance of reasonableness that it does not in reality possess.

The most powerful temptation that assails the historian, and the one most fatal to the truly scientific character of his work—that is, the one which is likely to introduce into it the largest element of unreality—is the desire to make the historic process seem systematic, orderly and logical. This temptation is especially strong in the treatment of national history, for the reason that a writer is predisposed to see in it the realization of predetermined national ideals through the development of special national qualities. But, in reality, was there ever a historic nation that was not more or less composite in its origin, or that was permitted to develop logically and normally its own inner life? Does not history, truthfully written, show that the life of every people has been perturbed and its normal development perverted or arrested, if not by its own exploits and adventures, by the rivalry, the ambitions, or the hostility of its neighbors? Have not the policies of nearly every nation been deeply influenced, and sometimes almost wholly determined, by the general political system of which it has formed a part? It is not perhaps unfitting, therefore, to point out in an international congress of historians how much the truth of history is liable to suffer from regarding the historic process from a purely national point of view. In reality, nothing can be more deceptive. Are not art, trade, industry, education, literature and even the forms of government profoundly affected by the contact and influence of other nations? Why, then, from a scientific point of view should historians be reproached, as they sometimes have been, for busying themselves with international treaties and conventions? Are not these conventions, whether enforced by arms or entered into voluntarily, the most vital expressions of international development? And what more distinctly marks the progress of civilization than the mutual obligations which sovereign states are disposed to assume in their relations with one another?

I do not mean to disparage the pragmatic world, but until the historic process is entirely governed by fixed and definite principles of conduct, how can history be scientifically written upon the assumption that it is the product of universal forces acting under universal laws? Thus, from every point of view, it is evident that the function of the historian is not to deal with uniformities or with universal formulas, but with the variations of human conduct as measured by its success and its failure upon the scale of rational endeavor; for history is nothing more nor less than the record of man's efforts to solve the problems with which he is confronted by his nature and his environment.

It is good for mankind to realize that, although living in a universe governed by law, as a result of its freedom it has sometimes gone wrong; and that, without a loyal adherence to great principles, it may go wrong again. The best antidote to this eventuality is a true science of the past. But, whether it be for good or for evil, as men of science, dealing with the largest and most instructive aspect of human development, historians are bound by that scientific conscience which is the test, the badge and the glory of their profession to unveil reality and give meaning to the words, "Die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht."

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